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ABSTRACT

Nebraska public schools have experienced a substantial growth in the numbers of children being served by special education programs, particularly in the past 10 years. This increase in services has greatly impacted state budget allotments for special education. For example in 1994, $115 million was appropriated to Nebraska school districts for special education costs; for the 1995-96 school year, the amount will rise to $122 million. The main reason for this increase is the addition of staff members and programming to meet the needs of an increasing number of disabled children. Other reasons why special education costs more than regular education include: (1) a low teacher/student ratio; (2) an increase in the survival rate of disabled children; (3) de-institutionalization of children with severe disabilities; (4) extended school year and extended school day; (5) inflated equipment costs; (6) high costs associated with inclusion; (7) facility improvements increasing accessibility for the disabled; (8) providing services to students placed in private schools; (9) excessive paperwork; (10) transportation costs; (11) shifting of financial responsibility between state agencies; and (12) an increase in student referrals from regular education and other sources. This paper suggests that placing a cap on special education costs is not the answer to control costs, but rather that some costs should become the responsibility of regular education, the Department of Public Institutions, and the Department of Social Services. (LP)

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NINETEEN REASONS WHY SPECIAL EDUCATION SHOULD COST MORE THAN REGULAR EDUCATION

Introduction

Some things in life seem obvious. For example, "It takes a big dog to weigh a ton". There are countless examples in the world of education also. Sometimes however, the general public and our media outlets do not see the some things as obvious as we in the field of education do.

Recent editorials in Nebraska's largest circulation newspaper (Omaha World-Herald) have made it clear that we have a major gap in communication. The newspaper editorial and articles clearly indicate that the writers are dismayed that special education costs are increasing faster than regular education costs. None of my administrative colleagues in Northeast Nebraska schools are surprised by this cost discrepancy.

The idea of cost containment for special education programs in Nebraska has been brewing for several years. In an article in the Omaha World-Herald on January 17, 1993, "Rising Special Ed Costs Concern Officials", Governor Ben Nelson expressed his concerns. He proposed a two-year budget that would increase special education funding by more than $30 million. He was quoted as saying, "Something must be done to get the cost of special education under control. It's an area that has to be looked at."

As a result of these concerns, the Nebraska Unicameral established a Special Education Accountability Commission. In a working draft for public discussion dated September 27, 1994 the following information was included.

> "Many believe that special education stands at a cross-roads in the State of Nebraska. Intense State budget pressure and recent fundamental changes in the financing of k-12 education have escalated the level of scrutiny on cost increases for special education programs; cost increases which have outpaced growth in nearly all other areas of the State and school district budgets for more than a decade. (For example, while the total increase in special education expenditures for the years 1978 to 1993--using federal, State and local funds--averaged 10.82%, the total expenditures for regular education averaged 6.65%.)"

It is a fact that special education programs in Nebraska have grown substantially over these past 30 years. In 1965, a publication was issued by the Nebraska Division of Instructional Services entitled Special Education in Nebraska. It was written by Donald Sherrill, who later went on to become

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Director of Special Education for Lincoln Public Schools. The publication states that "The Nebraska special education program was established in the State Department of Education in 1949. Legislation provides that the Special Education Section may financially reimburse local school districts for initiating and maintaining special education programs." The section on financial reimbursement for school districts was amazing in it's simplicity.

> "Nebraska school laws also specify that such financial help shall be available after an amount equal to the regular per pupil cost of the district has been spent for the education and therapy of the exceptional child. The amount of state funds for the education and therapy of these children shall not exceed the following amounts per annum: (1) physically handicapped children, six hundred dollars per pupil, and (2) educable mentally retarded children, three hundred dollars per pupil; provided that in no instance shall the total amount of state aid and the per pupil cost exceed the per pupil cost of the special education program of the servicing district or four thousand five hundred dollars per teacher or therapist, whichever is the lesser. The Special Education Section also reimburses local districts for trainable mentally retarded children an amount equal to that paid by the County in which the child resides up to four hundred dollars per child.
>
> Approval of reimbursement funds is conditional upon appropriations provided by the Nebraska State Legislature. Nearly 8,000 children were enrolled in special education in Nebraska during the 1964-65 school year."

Further evidence of growth in special education numbers is taken from the 1993-94 Nebraska Special Education Statistical Report. In 1993 Nebraska school districts reported 37,112 children with verified disabilities. In 1979 school districts reported a total of 30,007 students with verified disabilities. Therefore, the growth from 1979 until the present time, is approximately the same as the total number reported in 1965.

The Omaha World-Herald, in an article on "Special Education on Rise; Officials See Many Causes", included a graph illustrating special education enrollment increases in the Omaha area from 1984 to 1994.

See Appendix A.

In 1984 the State of Nebraska appropriated $47 million dollars to Nebraska school districts for special education costs. In 1994, $115 million dollars have been appropriated. For the 1995-96 school year under Governor Nelson's plan, the appropriation would rise to $122 million. From then on, the Governor will be recommending a cap on spending for special education programs.

The Omaha area is not the only area that has shown increased growth in special education programs. There has also been substantial growth in the rural areas. Norfolk Public Schools, in northeast Nebraska, has reported tremendous increases in these past four years. In a Norfolk Daily News article dated November 15, 1994, Superintendent Randy Nelson reported to board members that "the number of students participating in special education programs in Norfolk has grown from 424 students four years ago to 541 students this year - an increase of 27.6 percent. Special education expenditures in Norfolk has increased from $882,580 four years ago to $1,453,743 this year. This represents a 64.7 percent growth in four years."

The Norfolk Public Schools special education increases appear to be a statewide phenomenon. Special education enrollments from 1979 to 1993 have increased, even though overall student enrollment from 1979 to 1993 has dropped from 294,607 students to 285,917 students. As a percentage of enrollment, special education has increased from 9.2% to 11.5%.

See Appendix B.

All of the above listed information can be summarized as follows: **Nebraska public schools have experienced a substantial growth in numbers of children being served by special education programs over these past 30 years. This is especially true over these recent ten years. Increased numbers of students with disabilities has resulted in increased numbers of staff members to provide programs for these students.** An increase of staff members is the major reason for the increase in special education costs. According to State Department Special Education Final Financial Report data for the 1992-93 school year, the following information is significant. Allowable costs indicate that salaries accounted for 77.12% of overall expenditures. Fringe benefits accounted for 19.24% of claimed allowable costs. Salaries and fringe benefits totaled 96.36% of allowable claims. Therefore, all of the other allowable costs, such as in-service, staff mileage, supplies, equipment, etc. only amount to 3.64% of the total costs.

Nineteen Reasons

When listing 19 reasons why special education costs should be more than regular education costs, the reasons all relate back to the fact that there are more students and the need for more staff. The 19 reasons are listed as follows:

1. Overall increase in the number of children with disabilities. The numbers have more than tripled since the 1960's. There are numerous factors that contribute to this increase including general societal factors. According to the Nebraska Tax Research Council, Nebraska State expenditures for welfare and Medicaid have increased from $20 million in 1974 to $225.6 million in 1994 during the time that special education costs increased from $11 million to $115.4 million.

2. Staff costs. Students in special education require a much lower teacher/student ratio than students in regular education. School districts must compete with hospitals, rehab. units, and private corporations in order to attract specialists such as physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists and audiologists.

3. Keeping kids alive. Medical science has been very successful in helping very fragile children survive their birth and early years. Many of these children are technology-dependent, require tube feeding, need extensive therapies and need extensive staff time after they are placed in a school program. Thirty years ago these children probably would not have survived.

4. De-institutionalization. Since the late 1960's Nebraska has been withdrawing students from institutional placements and returning them to their local towns and school districts. Very few placements have been made into these institutions in the past ten years. Previously, many of the students with severe mental retardation, severe visual handicaps, and severe hearing impairments were placed in Nebraska state schools or facilities. As such, they were the financial responsibility of the Department of Public Institutions, the Department of Social Services or some other state agency.

5. Extended school year. Depending on the nature and severity of their disability, some children require additional days in their school year in order to prevent regression and provide for their individual needs of self-sufficiency and independence. Approximately 50 students in northeast Nebraska (Educational Service Unit One area) are attending school for 215 days compared to a regular school year of 175-180 days.

6. Extended school day. Some students, because of the nature of their disability, require special programs and placements that create a school day much longer than the traditional 8:30 to 3:30 school day of students in regular education. This writer is aware of several school districts that pay one agency tuition for the standard school day and another agency for "awake time" in their residential program for a total of a 16 hour day.

7. Assistive technology. Assistive technology devices for special education programs can be very high tech, sophisticated, electronic equipment in order to meet the individual needs of all children, despite the severity level of their disability.

8. Inflated equipment costs. Materials for special education seem to cost substantially more than materials for regular education. Because of lower production needs, companies charge more for their products. .

9. Costs of inclusion. In the November 1994 issue of the School Administrator several articles report that some educators and parents

fear that inclusion practices will drain resources from the system because of increased staff needs and duplicate programs.

10. Accessibility. Many school districts have made major improvements in their facilities to comply with standards for the American Disabilities Act. The Nebraska Department of Education shared in the costs of these improvements up until the 1993-94 school year. Most frequent renovations are for remodeling restrooms, cutting curbs, installing ramps and adding special lifts for student access to upper levels.

11. Ages zero to 21. Nebraska special education programs entitle children with disabilities from date of birth through the age of 21 to services. Additional personnel are needed in special education for the zero to five age group, for homebound instruction and early childhood centerbased programs that are not the responsibility of regular education. Transition services for the older students after high school, are also the responsibility of special education personnel.

12. Litigation. Special education is governed by many more rules and regulations than regular education. Funded advocacy groups insure that parents understand their rights. Court cases demand specific programs and placements for certain students. These requirements are usually far in excess of any education costs incurred in regular education.

13. Private school placements. In addition to some students being placed in private facilities, special education is also responsible for providing services to public school students that attend parochial schools. This accounts for a loss of staff time in the public schools. Some districts have also purchased mobile learning units to park near the parochial schools in order not to violate federal "separation of church and state issues".

14. Excessive paperwork. Special education requires much more paperwork and meeting time that runs the gamut from referral forms to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that are not required of students in regular education. Additional paperwork requirements in Nebraska such as Medicaid in Public Schools (MIPs), also use valuable staff time in order to secure the necessary funding.

15. Transportation costs. In rural Nebraska, sometimes students with disabilities need to travel great distances to attend an appropriate program. This is either achieved by districts purchasing expensive vans with lifts or by paying parents mileage. Itinerant staff members providing special services also must travel to a far greater extent than teachers providing regular education.

16. Shifting of financial responsibility. In the past 20 years there have been numerous incidences in Nebraska where financial responsibility

has transferred from one state agency to another. An example is that at one time physical and occupational therapy services were paid by the Department of Social Services. There seems to be an annual tug of war about the financial responsibility for students that are Wards of the Court.

17. New labels. In 1965 the Nebraska Department of Education recognized seven different types of special education programs. Categories and program types have increased substantially since that time with recent additions being for students with attention deficit disorder, autism, and traumatic brain injury. Some educators feel that learning disorders are being recognized more easily and the criteria for students with learning disabilities opens these programs up to increasing numbers of students.

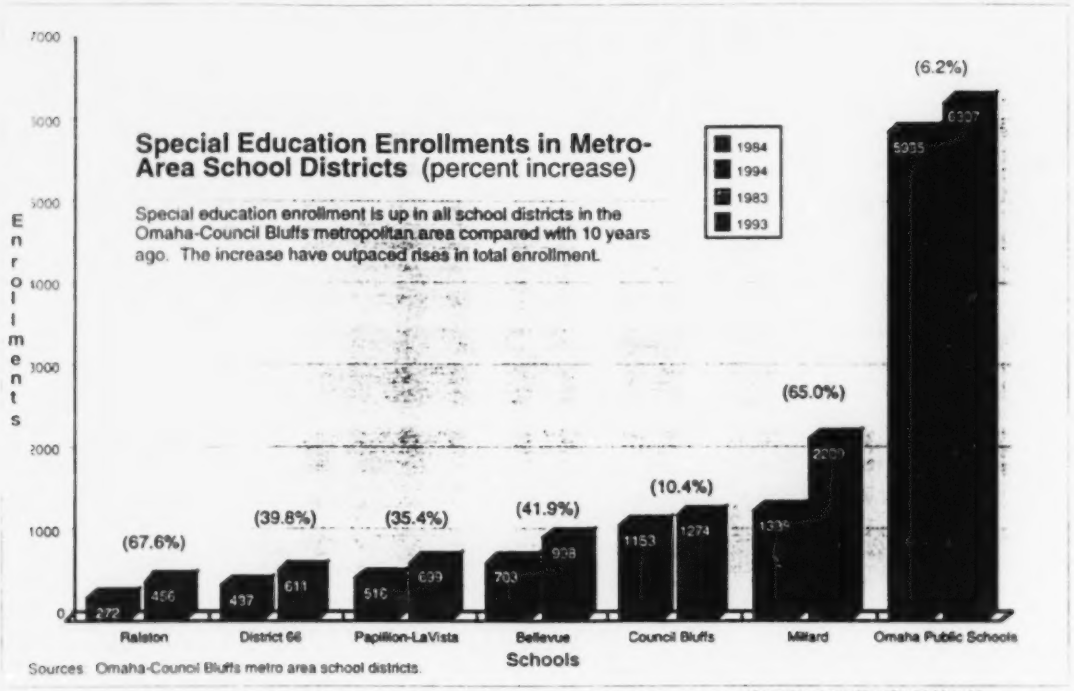
18. Regular education pressure. Regular education administrators and teachers have been more than willing to refer some of their students for special education services. This is especially true in recent years for students with behavioral disorders. They are referred in order to reduce the violent behavior in their classrooms.

19. Victims of our own success. Because of the success of Nebraska's special education programs, the field has been flooded with referrals from a variety of sources. School districts have dutifully provided Child Find information to the public. Child Find activities have accomplished the goal of early referrals and identification of students with disabilities. Medical personnel, Social Service workers and other interested parties have made special education referrals very soon after the child's identification.

It is probably reasonable to assume that there are more than 19 reasons why special education costs have increased so dramatically. The point is, that special education costs truly have increased more than regular education costs by approximately four percent a year since 1978. The question is, what can be done about it? It does not seem reasonable that an arbitrary cap on special education funding will do much to control the costs. The effect of the cap would be to shift the costs back to the local school district.

A shift in cost does not really do anything to address the 19 or more reasons why special education costs are increasing at a rate faster than regular education costs. Perhaps we need some fundamental changes in the state laws governing special education. Maybe some of these costs should be the responsibility of regular education, the Department of Public Institutions or the Department of Social Services. It is possible that special education, by itself, cannot manage a dog that weighs a ton?

Appendix A



Darrell Forbes/The World-Herald

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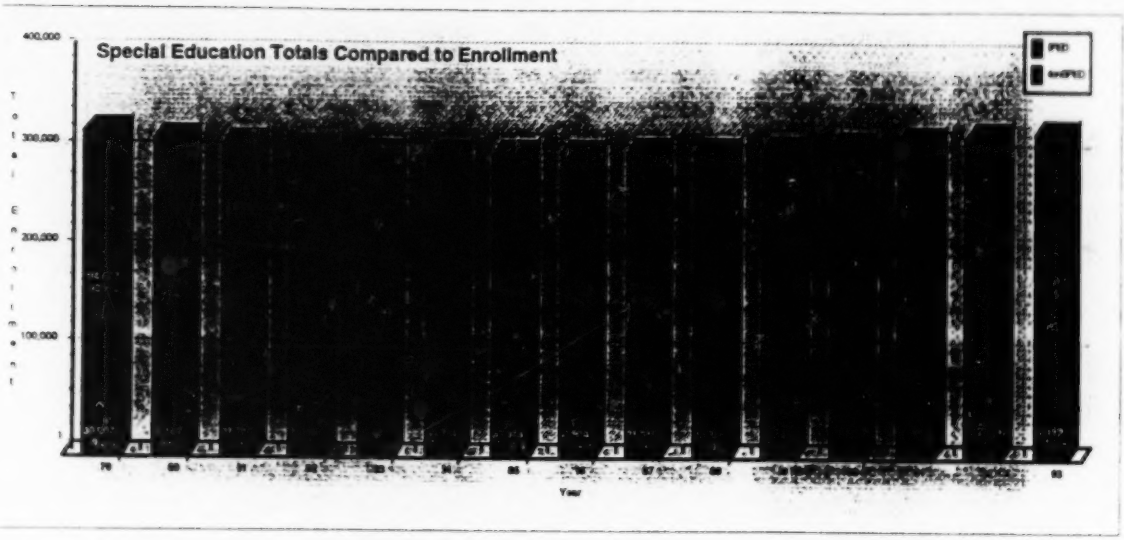
Appendix B



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